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DE RUEHLB #0167/01 0531256
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 221256Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6586
INFO RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 3921
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 3798
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 3627
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 1574
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0038
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4039
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000167

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2020
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: HARIRI RALLY HIGHLIGHTS CHALLENGES FACING MARCH 14
COALITION

REF: A. BEIRUT 65
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 118
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 162

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Tens of thousands of Future Movement, Lebanese Forces and Kataeb supporters joined the February 14 rally -- organized by the March 14 coalition -- to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Turnout was less than in previous years, and -- as expected -- neither onetime March 14 stalwart Druze leader Walid Jumblatt nor members of the March 8 alliance participated. Prime Minister Saad Hariri underscored the importance of national unity to preserve stability and enforce the state's authority, while the other speakers adhered to partisan themes. Moderate Shia dignitaries, who had attended previous March 14 events, were noticeably absent. Although Hariri bucked pressure to make the event non-partisan, the event pointed to the constraints he is facing as prime minister. End Summary.

A "HAPPENING," NOT A RALLY

[1](#)2. (C) On February 14, the March 14 coalition organized a mass rally in Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut to commemorate the fifth anniversary of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination. Tens of thousands of Lebanese from various regions gathered in the square, but this year's turnout was a fraction of that of previous years. Druze MP Marwan Hamadeh, a prominent figure in March 14, told polstaff that the day lacked a serious political message because March 14 had turned the event into a "happening," rather than a political rally. Hamadeh deplored the atmosphere that prevailed at the rally and said the presence of singers and a comedic television presenter turned the rally into a mere "outdoor event."

JUMBLATT CONTINUES DISTANCING
HIMSELF FROM MARCH 14

[1](#)3. (U) As expected, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt continued his policy of distancing himself from March 14. Jumblatt, who had advocated an event that would include all political parties -- including March 8 -- in the end did not participate in the rally. Instead, accompanied by PM Hariri, he headed a delegation of officials from his Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) to Rafik Hariri's gravesite and left Martyrs Square immediately after. Expressing dissatisfaction

with the partisan content of the speeches delivered at the event by Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Kataeb head Amine Gemayel, and former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, Jumblatt said in a televised interview the same day that he was concerned only with Hariri's speech since, "I was paying a visit to some friends but returned home just in time to listen to Hariri's speech only." Later the same day, Jumblatt paid a visit to Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

HARIRI AVOIDS PARTISAN RHETORIC

¶4. (C) The national unity rhetoric of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's differed markedly the partisan speeches of his March 14 allies. Hariri did not mention the issue of Hizballah's weapons but instead underlined the importance of national unity and cooperation among Lebanese to preserve national stability, enforce the state's authority, and defend against Israeli threats. Speaking about his recent visit to Syria, Hariri said that he would seek to maintain the "open window" to Syria that the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement made possible to build a new relationship between Lebanon and Syria. This relationship, Hariri stressed, would be from an "independent, free and sovereign state toward another independent, free and sovereign state." The crowd booed Hariri's mentions of Syria.

¶5. (SBU) The speeches of Gemayel, Siniora and Geagea hewed closely to traditional March 14 themes of opposition to Syrian interference in Lebanon and the need to bring Hizballah's weapons under the control of the state. Gemayel

said, "National sovereignty implies that the democratically elected authority should have the monopoly of weapons in the country." Siniora stressed that the March 14 alliance rejected the idea that any side impose its opinion through the use of force or weapons, in reference to Hizballah's arsenal. For his part, Geagea indicated that weapons outside the state's authority were a burden on the Lebanese state since they attracted foreign aggression.

GOAL TO MAINTAIN THE GEAGEA-HARIRI ALLIANCE

¶6. (C) March 14 figures applauded the turnout at the rally and noted that the main goal of the event was to maintain a strong alliance between Geagea and Hariri. Samir Franjiyeh, member of the March 14 Secretariat, told polstaff on February 18 that irrespective of the turnout and the speeches delivered, the main goal was to counter sustained Syrian efforts to disengage Hariri from Geagea. Franjiyeh believed that Syria and its allies in Lebanon had launched a campaign to discredit Geagea in a bid to break the Hariri-Geagea alliance. Franjiyeh cited, in particular, the speech delivered by Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on February 16, in which Nasrallah echoed Geagea's speech, without naming him, to accuse him of conniving with Israel to instigate a war on Lebanon (ref C).

¶7. (C) Comment: March 14 leaders, although defensive about the relatively low turnout for the event, pointed to it as a sign of continued Christian-Sunni unity. Although Prime Minister Hariri bucked pressure to make the event non-partisan, his speech points to the constraints he is facing as prime minister.

DAUGHTON